

What Professionals Need to Know About BDSM

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A Note on Consent

This pamphlet is to help professionals meet culturally competent ethical standards in work with those of this underserved population; having said that, it is not our intention that this be used as the sole source of information regarding BDSM or kink.

To emphasize what is conveyed throughout the pamphlet, we feel that BDSM and kink is like any other sexual or intimate relationship—it should always be consensual, it requires active dialogue regarding responsibilities, expectations, and potential risks. So while some may not find appeal in the behaviors, it is the duty of a professional to differentiate between BDSM and kink from abuse as separate concepts. If BDSM/kink behavior lacks consent, honest understanding of risks, and/or care for the wellbeing of self or others, it *can* become abusive. Signs of multiple emergency room trips, almost total cut-off from social support, hypervigilance, and impaired functioning are more likely to indicate abuse than the bruises, cuts, and exhaustion that can be typical of BDSM or kink behaviors.



Consent is critical to the BDSM community as it separates kink from pathological or abusive behaviors (Taylor & Ussher, 2001). **Consent** is an agreement to engage in BDSM activity and has two major schools of thought within the community. The first consent guidelines are “**Safe, Sane, Consensual**” (SSC). What these terms mean is heavily debated in the community as they are difficult to quantify. Some also argue that these terms limit those engaging in edgeplay (discussed later) and because it is so ambiguous, they prefer to define their consent as “**Risk-Aware Consensual Kink**” (RACK).

This pamphlet was written with the understanding and assumption of sexual rights and needs. Various definitions of sexual rights have been outlined by different reputable associations. We recommend Planned Parenthood and American Humanist Association:

<http://ippf.org/resource/Sexual-Rights-IPPF-declaration>

http://www2.hu-berlin.de/sexology/ECE5/a_bill_of_sexual_rights_and_re.html

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INTRODUCTION

In 1999 Susan Wright and Dr. Charles Moser wrote a short pamphlet entitled *What is S/M?*. Over the next fifteen years it was distributed to innumerable professionals in an effort to both explain BDSM and dispel some myths in the wake of a decade of explosive community growth during the early years of the Internet. In addition to helping law enforcement, lawyers, therapists, social workers, academics, and researchers come to a greater understanding of BDSM and kink it also provided the basis for documents over the next fifteen years that various organizations and individuals within the BDSM subculture put together for their own dissemination and use to explain to curious beginners exploring a new world of sexuality and relationships.

Now in 2014, in a much changed world of social media and social awareness of BDSM and kink, that original pamphlet needed an update and this document is the result. The purpose of this pamphlet is to help professionals be more culturally competent in their work with kinky clients (a more general term, “kink” or “kinky” is often used interchangeably with BDSM). Clients who are involved in various aspects of the BDSM lifestyle have a language and a whole host of experiences that professionals may be unfamiliar with. This pamphlet will **give professionals a basic understanding** of BDSM terminology, the clinical issues that frequently arise for kinky clients in therapy, an understanding of the stigma that people in the kink community experience, and information on what is and is not abuse within the kink community.

Among the challenges of writing this pamphlet is that the topic itself is poorly studied. Until recently, the research was overwhelmingly focused on kink as being a manifestation of psychological pathology and the stigma attached to people who practice it. The vast majority of texts available to early researchers in any discipline were books written by and for members of the BDSM community and were primarily focused on “how to” rather than a discussion of various professional issues. Since the original *What is S/M* pamphlet was written in 1999 the study of BDSM and kink has expanded beyond the psychological and into other fields such as anthropology and sociology and has slowly gained more legitimacy as a subject of research. In an attempt to create a document that is culturally competent and does not focus on any single theoretical model, the pamphlet cites only a few choice pieces from the literature. This is also to ensure that many of the referenced works will be accessible to a majority of those reading this pamphlet. While some texts are cited within the body of the article, an interdisciplinary list of generally helpful and useful texts has been appended to the end of the pamphlet.

DEFINING BDSM

BDSM has multiple definitions but the most commonly accepted include bondage and discipline, domination and submission, and sadism and masochism (Cross & Matheson, 2006). These are broad terms describing how people *generally* interact with others sexually.

A little more specifically:

- **Bondage:** The practice of restraining individuals through the use of rope, chain, cuffs made for that purpose, or other devices or materials. The purpose can be to render the person immobile,

to make the person accessible, or for the purpose of display which might be intended to cause humiliation.

- **Discipline:** The practice of controlling behavior using rules and punishment. Punishment can be both physical like spanking or emotional like humiliation.
- **Domination:** When someone is granted control or authority in a scene, situation, or relationship. Dominants are usually referred to with a capital letter (e.g. You, D/s, Master, M/s).
- **Submission:** When someone grants control or authority in a scene, situation, or relationship. Submissives are usually referred to with a lowercase letter (e.g. i, D/s, slave, M/s).
- **Sadism:** Being sexually excited by the consensual application of force and infliction of physical or emotional pain in a scene, situation, or relationship.
- **Masochism:** Being sexually excited by the consensual receiving of force and infliction of physical or emotional pain in a scene, situation, or relationship. Sometimes known as a “pain slut.”

THE HISTORY OF BDSM

The influence and history of BDSM is quite diverse and the subculture has truly embraced technology in order to reach more individuals, offer support, and to practice in a safe environment.

The term “sadism” was inspired by the Marquis de Sade and his works, *Philosophy in the Bedroom* and *Justine* while “masochism” derives from Leopold von Sacher-Masoch who wrote *Venus in Furs*. Literature has continued to influence the community even to forming a distinct Gorean subculture in the BDSM community. Gor is fantasy world characterized by male dominance and female slavery in a series of novels published mostly through the 1970-80’s by John Norman and while the practices are emulated in some relationships, they are often subject to derision and ridicule by people who have not chosen this form of expression. Similarly, jewelry inspired by content Pauline Réage’s *Story of O* is popular, and the use of both the jewelry and the term “Roissy” has been used as a coded signal to indicate interest in BDSM.

BDSM also takes a lot of its concepts from history and often translates those into the types of relationships that are practiced. As Victorian Era literature influenced the labels adhered to BDSM behaviors, so too did the culture. **Victorian households** are a style of D/s or M/s relationships which reflect the class power and authority dynamics of Victorian England. In the 1980’s, a subculture in the United States, **Goth**, arose focusing on morbid sensuality and Victorian romanticism which connects it frequently with the vampire, Modern Primitives, and BDSM cultures. Individuals in the Goth subculture frequently share a lot of the aesthetics of the kink community including wearing a lot of black, wearing collars and tall boots, etc. **1950’s households** have gendered authority based upon a D/s relationship in which the man is generally Dominant and the primary economic provider while the woman is submissive. The 1950’s household extends to child-care as this role is solely placed on the woman as well as the chores in the home. In some Christian D/s relationships, the theme of the submissive woman

to the Dominant man is continued; however, the **surrendered wife** “surrenders” any decision-making authority to the husband through the divine mandate scripted for him.

Although all these concepts affecting modern BDSM predate the 20th century, as Robert Bienvenu describes in *The Development of SadoMasochism as a Cultural Style in the Twentieth Century United States* (1998) the BDSM culture did not assemble as a visible community until after World War II when gay men started motorcycle clubs as a way to maintain the intimacy and bonding that they had achieved in military life. This would become the **Leather Community** (distinguished by their use and value for leather) and with the inclusion of rough sex, the **Old Leather/Old Guard**. The Old Guard is frequently described as having strict rules (e.g. only gay men allowed, leather clothing must be earned), hierarchies, and protocols surrounding leathersex. One protocol included the **hanky code** where colorful scarves or bandanas were worn to illustrate preferences for top or bottom and behaviors (e.g. bondage, fisting, etc.). This also developed into **flagging** which used the same concept but with keys, patches, pins, etc. Both the hankies and the flags varied depending on the region or the specific BDSM community.

The **New Leather/New Guard** formed in the 1980's and 90's by rejecting some of the strict rules and hierarchy in the Old Leather community and was more flexible to heterosexuals and lesbians joining. Through the varying points of view, people began seeking solace in their **Leather Families** which they were able to personally select for support or sometimes even replacement of a family of origin. Pansexuals also wished to stretch the boundaries of leathersex and BDSM, forming a **Pansexual Leather** community in the 1980's and 90's. They differed from most of the New Guard in that they sought mainstream inclusion and acceptance by offering educational workshops and social events. **Pansexual BDSM** mainly focuses on modern, primarily heterosexual, clubs, and organizations which frequently operate openly. From this openness, it is no surprise that the queer culture deriving from the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) Community created **Queer Leather** in the late 1990's and early 2000's. This community values gender transgression and rejection of dichotomous gender labels. These more inclusive values and the general safe and consenting atmosphere of BDSM have made the various kink communities very open to the practice of engaging in different forms of consensual non-monogamy such as swinging and polyamory.

Parallel to the rise of the early gay Leather subculture was an equally rich but quite different heterosexually focused subculture based on different bondage and fetish themes. It included artists such as Irving Claw (photographer), Bettie Page (actress), John Willie (comics author), and Eric Stanton (painter) (Bienvenu, 1998).

The Internet has also heavily influenced the BDSM community as people can gain support and access a variety of sexual experiences from the safety and comfort of the home. It continuously influences the language used by those in the community adding new vernacular like “**squick**” (disgust), “**WIITWD**” (what it is that we do), and “**YKINMKBYKIOK**” or “**YKINMK**” (your kink is not my kink but your kink is OK).

BDSM BEHAVIORS AND RELATIONSHIPS

Engaging in the behaviors and activities of BDSM is often referred to as **play**. A negotiation period precedes a **scene**, a period of play, during which boundaries and limits are set. Limits can be hard or soft; **soft limits** are behaviors, situations, or statements which may be practiced in a scene, but only under certain circumstances or with certain people while **hard limits** are behaviors, situations, or statements that will not be allowed under any circumstance. After scenes, it is encouraged and standard for the people in the scene to engage in **aftercare** which is also discussed during the negotiation period and may include eating to restore blood sugar, cuddling, being wrapped in a blanket, or spending a brief time alone. Aftercare can build intimacy and allows for processing of the scene in a controlled and reassuring manner. While negotiation, play, and aftercare are universal to every kink interaction, how they are conducted will vary.

There are a variety of types of relationships that are currently present in the BDSM community. As scenes include a top and a bottom, the typical relationships are Dominant and submissive (D/s) or Master and slave (M/s). These relationships are characterized by authority transfer (AT) or power exchange (PE) or total power exchange (TPE). It is also important to note that while these relationships encompass a wide variety of emotional and physical play, those who engage in these behaviors are not necessarily in a D/s relationship or even BDSMers. For example, not all masochists allow for an authority transfer, nor do all people who fetishize leather engage in BDSM. There are also quite a few people in the BDSM community who have egalitarian relationships outside of the bedroom but take on D/s or other roles for sex, fun, or only at certain times. It is important to note that not everyone who engages in BDSM behaviors has interest in having a differential power dynamic in their relationships.

There are a huge number of people who use kink behaviors as a part of their repertoire who do not think of themselves as a part of the BDSM community. For instance there are large numbers of people who do spanking as a part of their sexual play but do not see that as anything other than a typical sexual behavior. It is important in working with clients to allow them to identify themselves as a part of the community or not based on their own self concept.

It should be understood that there is a continuum to Dominants and variations on what aspects of their identity they find critical. Master and slave relationships, or **M/s relationships**, are seen as a rigid and more intense D/s interaction. Individuals in a M/s relationship may choose to enter a **no-limits relationship** where the slave has decided to adopt the limits of the other in place of their own. There are different types of Domination, most commonly physical, emotional, and psychological but there are other forms such as monetary, and orgasmic. Couples engaged in a power dynamic may need assistance communicating around the creation of limits and contracts delineating what exactly a submissive or slave is agreeing to in the context of a relationship with a power dynamic. It is always important to begin the negotiations from a place of equality so consent is not coerced or pressured.

Gender is also critical for those in the community. In relation to the above dynamic, some female Masters prefer "**Mistress**" while others abhor this title due to its association with professional

tops/Dominatrices. Gender also affects how Dominants identify; for example, Domina, Domme (pronounced “Dom”), and FemDom are all female dominants with slight differences between them.

When developing a D/s relationship, there are different ways in which an individual can communicate their status to others. **Collars** are the most common form of indentifying a bottom/submissive/slave in a committed relationship. There are **training collars** or **collars of consideration** similar to engagement rings in the vanilla community, indicating that while the D/s relationship is in the process of **collaring** (a term which can also be used to indicate a collaring ceremony), the collar has not been fully accepted by both the Dominant and the submissive. Similar to the hanky code used by the Old Guard, collars may be in different colors or have different characteristics to communicate the aspects of the D/s relationship and these characteristics vary per individual, region, or specific BDSM community. The protocols surrounding the collars varies as well—some communities are offended by those who talk to or acknowledge the presence of those on a collar without permission of the Dominant or Master, while others are not as strict.

Further, Dominant and submissive behavior can vary between individuals. Although D/s relationships typically have the submissive servicing the Dominant, there are some **Service Tops** who gain enjoyment from giving the bottom what they desire or from being occasionally dominated (known as **bottoming from the top**). Similarly, a **pushy bottom** may change the dynamic intentionally or unintentionally by controlling the scene after it has been agreed that the Top will control it; this is called **topping from the bottom**.

THE BIOLOGY BEHIND BDSM

Research into the biological underpinnings of BDSM is in its infancy. What is more available is general research into pain, trance states, and the neuropsychology of attachment. What we have listed is some findings in these arenas and made our own implications to BDSM.

First, it should be clarified that not all BDSM activity is painful. Verbal and psychological behaviors require no physical pain and while bondage manipulates the body, it is possible to comfortably tie someone without causing pain. Further, there is also **sensation play**, which encompasses behaviors that intended to be more sensual than painful.

Pain thresholds are frequently discussed in the context of BDSM. Most people are aware that some peoples’ tolerance for pain is higher, some lower. Many (particularly BDSMers) have even found out that they can challenge themselves to higher and higher pain thresholds. There are several theories as to *how* this happens but here are two main ones:

- **Neurological:** There are some studies suggesting that some people are just neurologically, or physiologically, wired to handle more pain. Pain is a poorly understood topic but the reasons for this could include differences in the various pain receptors (either number or sensitivity) s well as differences in the mediation of pain in the brain. There are also differences in how pain is experienced by men and women which may play an additional role in some cases.

- **Cognitive:** You may be familiar with “cognitive appraisals” i.e. what meanings are attached to sensations. BDSM people may not experience certain kinky behavior as painful because they see it as sexual and pleasurable whereas someone outside the community would categorize the same behavior at the same intensity as negative and, therefore, excruciating.

Cognitions could also be considered further in regards to being open to new experiences and receptive to the possibility of them being pleasurable. As you can imagine, both psychological and social forces can contribute to this, which is why they are included below.

Finally, many BDSMers have considered cathartic and spiritual traits as making BDSM most pleasurable (Sadie, 2007). Several religious practices engage in self-flagellation, trance, and various rituals that parallel common BDSM behaviors. Subspace is frequently a goal in BDSM interactions in order to access feelings of euphoria. **Subspace** is an altered state of consciousness entered by bottoms during BDSM play. As trance is a possible and a common experience, we must acknowledge that some bottoms are unable to communicate safewords when necessary. Similarly, there is **top trance** or **top space** which is when the top enters an altered state of consciousness during BDSM play. In this state some tops start habitually hitting the same place, lose focus or aim, or get into a less verbal state or have other signs of being in an altered state. If a top is aware that they experience top space or top trance it is important that safety precautions be set up such as having a bottom who can stay out of subspace and be responsible for boundaries in the encounter or having third parties serve as spotters or both.

BDSM AND MENTAL HEALTH

There are a number of reasons why people who engage in kink seek therapy. For the most part those reasons are unrelated to the client’s kinks and are instead due to relationship problems, depression, anxiety and other issues (Connolly, 2006). Though sexual sadism and sexual masochism are still listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM V) most clients do not need treatment for these issues. If they do, it is often around the shame and social stigma caused by being kinky rather than the behavior itself—people can lose their job; custody of children; or relationships with family, friends, and partners. In the newest version of the DSM, someone can only be diagnosed as having one of these disorders if they practice these behaviors with nonconsenting individuals or if they have anxiety or distress around their participation in these behaviors. The practice of these behaviors in themselves is no longer diagnosable.

Frequently clients are closeted about their BDSM sexuality. Some are so closeted that they are not comfortable talking with their therapists about their kinks. Therapists are often not taught how to deal with **vanilla** (non-BDSM sexual interactions and identity) sexuality and can be even more caught off guard when they find that they have a kinky client.

THE PSYCHOLOGY BEHIND BDSM

One of the things to consider in working with kinky clients is the psychological meaning behind their kinks. Not all clients see any reason to explore the psychological meaning behind their kinks and that is

ok. Most people have a sense of what turns them on but not why. Some would suggest that if professionals assume that kink is a healthy thing then there is no reason to explore the reason behind it because we are not working on changing it in any way. Having said that, there may be something practical in finding meanings behind people's arousal templates to achieve a good understanding of a client's psyche (Kleinplatz, 2006). **Arousal templates** are people's maps around what turns them on (aka "Love Maps" – Money, 1986). These templates are often established earlier and do not tend to change; though people's relationships with kink can change, the kinks themselves tend not to. What can be threatening to a person in the natural exploration of these arousal templates which may range further from the person's expected comfort levels. Self-reflection becomes key as these feelings can be complicated by cultural messages explored later in this pamphlet.

One thing to keep in mind with people is what psychological purpose does the scene serve. Some kinky people are into humiliation play. For instance someone may use a spanking scene with some humiliation as a way to experience punishment for something so they can let it go. It is important to let individuals determine what they feel is healthy or unhealthy in their sexual expression, but it may be helpful to ask people how they feel after a scene and how it affects their sense of self.

Some people use kink to help them work through past traumas. This can be sexual trauma or it can be things that are much more complex, for instance one's relationships with parents or siblings. If a person is recreating past traumatic events through the kink expression it is important to explore that with them and see whether they feel that recreation is healthy. For some individuals recreating a scene of a past rape or sexual abuse helps them feel better about what happened like they can take control of what happened to them by choosing to do this. Sometimes people recreate their past traumas in a way where they take on the role of the abuser, again to feel like they can take more control and triumph over their past trauma. Others recreate their trauma without thinking about what that means and can feel worse about the encounter afterwards. It is up to the individual to decide whether the ways in which they are recreating their traumas are healthy or not.

SOCIAL INFLUENCES WITHIN BDSM

In the social sphere, there are many facets of the kinky person to keep in mind. While cultural competency has increased awareness of all the aspects that make up a client's culture or system, it is important to consider how these characteristics interact with a person's identification as kinky. Below is a brief list of examples that is by no means exhaustive but can get your mind towards thinking kinky.

- **Disabilities (both lifelong and acquired):** physical limitations can make it difficult to engage in any sexual behavior but may be even more difficult for the kinkster. For example: arthritis can make it difficult to use a whip or hold onto rope.
- **Medical Ailments:** medications can make people tired, sick, spend extensive time in the hospital, etc., wrecking havoc on their sex life but again, can be more troublesome for the BDSM'er. Example: medications that thin blood/cause easy bruising can make it painful or unsafe to engage in extended play.

- Race/Ethnicity: some ethnicities have a history of being enslaved which can add a more complicated layer to a Master/slave dynamic. This is particularly true for African Americans in American culture.
- Religion/Spirituality: some associate BDSM with spiritual practices, which deserves acknowledgement. For instance American Indian/Alaska Native cultures frequently used behaviors that are duplicated within BDSM as a part of their spiritual expression. Others may be conflicted because their religion does not necessarily coincide with their BDSM practices.
- Socioeconomic status: there is some debate that BDSM is a privileged practice as it typically requires access to clubs, paying for toys/rope/etc., or even frequent use of the Internet which may be difficult to obtain in public (due to filters or not wanting to be found out) if they do not have a private computer.
- Gender: gender (behavioral characteristics of masculinity and femininity vs. sex which is biological/physical presentation) is extremely fluid in the BDSM community and as implied above, a female Master does not automatically mean a “Mistress” or a “Mommy” as she may take on masculine roles within a scene and prefer to be addressed as “Master”, “Daddy”, “Sir”, etc.

Again, this is no where close to an exhaustive list nor may these specific issues be raised in a professional setting but it is critical for a kink-aware professional to consider these interactions when developing interventions or working with a client. Take a moment to consider what it would be like to be a feminist who is sexually submissive to males or an African American couple in a Master/slave dynamic (Sheff & Hammers, 2011).

Individuals or couples may also contact therapists or clergy to explore their curiosities or fantasies related to BDSM. As suggested before, there may be social guilt attached to these feelings that will need to be addressed. A practical tool you can suggest for a client just beginning to explore BDSM sexuality is the safe call. The **safe call** is a safety protocol used when someone is meeting a new play partner privately for the first time. It usually involves a phone call at a pre-arranged time to a pre-arranged person (like a friend, but there are also services in some BDSM communities around the country that offer this) to let them know that everything is fine. If the call is not made, or if the pre-arranged codes are not exchanged, the police are contacted.

In closing, we would like to remind you that there are BDSM communities online (one of the largest is FetLife.com) which hold local events and message boards. Practicing BDSM safely is important and tips on how to do this can be explored by clients at these events. There are also books that can be acquired from various places (e.g. adult book stores, online) some of which are listed below. We encourage you, as a professional, to explore what kinky resources are available in your area and have your client do the same.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to acknowledge David Rodemaker's contribution of his dissertation to form the backbones of this pamphlet. Thank you for all your work and research to the community and allowing us to capture a glimpse of it in this pamphlet.

REFERENCES

Here are some works we found helpful and thought you may also look into or suggest for others. This is not an exhaustive list (in fact, it's very short for the amount of resources out there!) but it does cover a variety of experience levels and audiences which we've tried to organize slightly for the reader. The first section is focused on academic works that are either journal articles, edited volumes of journal articles, or published dissertations. The second section is made up of work from within the BDSM community that are helpful for professionals and clients who need or who are looking for more than an beginners instruction manual. Some of these are highly focused on a particular topic, some are collections of essays that cover a range of topics. The third section is a very short list of beginner "how to" manuals that are good suggestions for clients who are looking for resources and unsure where to start or that professionals may find helpful to get a better sense of what is involved in BDSM play and relationships at a very basic level.

Academic Resources

American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). Washington, DC: Author.

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Community Resources

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Thompson, M. (Ed.) (2004). *Leatherfolk: radical sex, people, politics, and practice*. (3rd Edition). Los Angeles: Daedalus.

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